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Despite aid cutoff, contras are bigger & stronger: U.S.

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Washington (News Bureau)—The Central Intelligence Agency-trained rebel army in Nicaragua has more than doubled its size in the last year and is in a stronger position than ever in its five-year struggle to oust the Sandinista government, administration officials said yesterday.

The dramatic increase in the military strength of the rebels, along with millions of

dollars in new weapons and equipment, has been accompanied by steadily growing political strength for the rebels, U.S. officials said.

"It is clear that dissatisfaction with the Sandinista government is growing in Nicaragua," State Department spokesman Charles Redman said. "The growing numbers of refugees in Honduras and Costa Rica and the increasing success of the armed resistance, attracting new members to its ranks, are evidence of this."

When the U.S. Congress cut off aid to the rebels—known as contras—in March 1984, the rebel ranks were estimated at 7,800 men. U.S. officials said contra strength is now at 17,000.

The swelling ranks and the infusion of 5,000 G-3 automatic rifles, AK47 assault rifles and rocket-propelled grenade launchers and a million rounds of ammunition during the last few weeks have permitted the rebels to strike deeper into Nicaraguan territory, officials said.